DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 970 CE 060 574

AUTHOR Cassara, Beverly Benner
TITLE Thoughts on the Education of Women in the United States in the 1990's.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the University of Tubingen (Tubingen, Germany, April 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; *Adult Education; Continuing Education; *Employed Women; Feminism; Higher Education; *Low Income Groups; *Minority Groups; Program Development; Program Effectiveness; Program Implementation; Sex Fairness; *Womens Education

ABSTRACT

About 30 years ago, Betty Friedan published "The Feminine Mystique" and changed the lives of millions of women forever. The education of women, the prime vehicle to bring about change, has passed through many phases. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, many kinds of special programs for women blossomed in colleges and universities, continuing education, and training programs. The backlash from men, who felt discriminated against, led to their entrance into these programs and women's entrance into traditionally male programs. In the 1990s, as more women are employed and providing economic support for families, more women participate in continuing education, but do so on a part-time basis. Fortunately, part-time opportunities exist. A major problem that remains is the case of underserved low-income and minority women. The biggest barrier that keeps women from participating in publicly sponsored programs is their sense of hopelessness. One example of a successful method for working with these women prepares graduate students for working in a low-income housing project. These principles are discussed with the students: (1) the community women deserve and must be accorded respect; (2) no agenda, no specific program or project must be planned; (3) success comes in small steps or small things; and (4) fund raising must be done by working with the women. As the women develop and start to consider themselves worthy individuals, their children also begin to see themselves differently. (YLB)

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THOUGHTS ON THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE 1990'S

(Paper for presentation at the University of Tübingen, Germany
April, 1991)

by

Dr. Beverly Benner Cassara
Adjunct Professor of Adult Education
University of Southern Maine

Address:
RFD 2 Box 116
Bethel, Maine 04217

Telephone:
207-824-2957

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Just about thirty years ago, Betty Friedan published her book, The Feminine Mystique and the lives of millions of women would be changed forever--not all women, not immediately and not always for the better. Also, as much as we think of her as the founder of the women's movement, we know that change was in the air a decade after the Second World War. Everyone, including women themselves, had assumed that the women who were replacing soldiers in every phase of the work world would just fade back into a role of supporting the men whose important job it was to run things. This they did and they produced the "baby boom." Society was not so happy about that, since the population explosion was becoming a world wide concern.

More than that, intelligent work-experienced women, looked for some further challenge when they had raised these families. Sitting at home and knitting palled, and even volunteer work did not add up to a satisfying life purpose. These matters are all too vivid in my memory because I was the young mother of those days, and some of my friends were fretting out this situation with me. Women were beginning to write and publish their concerns, and I was one of them. (Cassara, 1962) However, Betty Friedan was the clever one who could prick the sleeping conscience of society and make it face what it truly did not want to see then, and, even today, women face an uphill fight in many situations. It will certainly take more than a generation, or even two, to open the doors for women which have been locked tightly against them for much of recorded history.

The education of women, which had to be the prime vehicle to bring about change, has passed through many phases of

contortions, transmutations and really valuable precious developmental stages, and yet, sometimes it seems there is still a long way to go. Nevertheless, the educational opportunities for women are in place, if not always optimal, and what remains is for women to push open those doors and play their responsible role in creating the future. For the work of human development is never done, and certainly, the role of women is still in great flux as family structures and patterns themselves are changing.

What a wonderful story I have to share with you in regard to change in family structure. One of the Kuwaiti governmental ministers in exile said on TV a few weeks ago, that perhaps it is time for Kuwaitis to take a second look at their way of family life. Why should there be four maids in every household, he said, adding that perhaps two would be enough if "we" do some of the work ourselves. I am not sure to whom he was referring with that pronoun "we," but I can guess. I am not sure how Kuwaiti women would feel about that, but it is a far different problem than we are experiencing in the United States.

One of our most recent areas of contention has been the question of the "supermom"--whether it is possible for a woman to compete with men at very demanding jobs while having children and running a home. This is probably an issue of concern to German women as well, but I distinctly recall that German women I interviewed in 1976 made it clear that they would choose between family and career--marriage maybe yes, but children no, if they wanted responsible executive positions.

The role of women in society is still changing, as is the

male role, and societal values and norms are certainly in flux. Some women are asking why they should emulate the competitive power-driven male role. And some men are asking why they themselves want to compete so hard for wealth and power that they end up with heart attacks and early death? There is some reason to believe that women may develop more cooperative styles with concern for the good of the community as a whole. We have seen this in some aspects of the women's movement. How far it will carry over into general society is hard to say. Certainly, as we see women stepping into executive jobs and lending their efforts to traditional male power plays, we have cause to worry.

This reminds me of an experience I had while doing the research study of the roles of professional women in universities in Berlin--fifteen years ago, to be sure. The women at the highest levels in the universities said there was no point to try to go to the top. They said that if they did that, they would be supervising men in the university and be responsible to men in the government and the only way the role could be played out, therefore, was the way that men would play it. Nothing else would be acceptable. I don't know if this still holds true.

This brings us squarely to the issue of the education of women, but not only women. How women <u>and men</u> are educated is of crucial importance. What support does society provide for changing labor roles for both men and women? What should be the purpose of their education? It would be great to be able to say the individual may freely choose. It would be great also if we could say that educational programs at every level are now

equally available to men and women alike. Legally, they must be, but attitudes and practices are another matter.

In the late 60's and all during the 70's many kinds of special programs for women blossomed in colleges and universities, in continuing education and in various training programs. These were often programs of a remedial nature to bring women up to speed quickly so they could play more equitable roles in the economic, political, and social concerns of society. These programs are well-known: women's studies, refresher courses, consciousness-raising, skills building, etc. Then there was a backlash from men who felt these special programs for women discriminated against them so the law was amended to read that gender could not be used as a criterion to bar men or women from any program. Therefore, today, while we have programs about women and their interests, and programs for women, men may not be excluded from these programs. This is as it should be, because both sexes surely need to understand the other better--not that many men rushed in to such programs. However, this move did help women in that they could not be barred from traditionally male programs.

The down side of it was that when special funding for women's programs was therefore cut, programs formerly focused for very special needs of women were replaced by institutions in favor of programs which would attract both men and women. When programs have to pay their own way, as many adult education programs do, then "marketing" is everything.

In this decade, we surely do see more women than ever before taking advantage of educational opportunities. A very few

statistics might be helpful. Lewis (1988) says that the attendance of women at postsecondary institutions outnumbers that of men, and women thirty-five and over by a ratio of two to one. "The number of women thirty-five and older enrolled in college has more than doubled since 1972 (U.S. Department of Education, Center for Educational Statistics, 1984)" (Rice and Meyer,1989). This same report shows that "95 percent of all the women participating in some form of adult or continuing education are part-time rather than full-time students." The U.S. Bureau of Census projects that by 1995, women between the ages of twenty and fifty-five will form 59% of the labor force. Another cogent statistic is the fact that in 1970 female heads of households with children under 18 years of age, accounted for 10.2 percent of all families, but by 1985, the number had risen to 19.0 percent.

These figures lead us to several obvious conclusions. More women are employed, more women provide the economic support for families. And, therefore, if more women are participating in continuing education, they must of necessity do so on a part-time basis. Fortunately, more and more part-time opportunities are becoming available as the concept of lifelong education becomes recognized for the valid necessity that it is.

Now then, from the foregoing, it would seem that educational opportunities for women must have improved amazingly over the last quarter century. This is true, but all problems are not solved. Many women still need consciousness-raising, development of self-esteem, and the belief that there is a place for them

"out there" beyond the safe confines of the kitchen, and there are special programs which provide such services. They also need to come to the realization that in addition to the motherly and fatherly duties of making good children for the world, they, the women as well as the men, have a responsibility of making a good world for the children. But there is another and important problem. Namely, the case of the underserved low-income and minority women. Far from seeing life as any way equitable for them, they see no light at the end of the tunnel and are often hopeless.

I am sure I do not know how many such women there are in the United States. Some people try to equate this group with the female single head of household. However, there are many cases where the female single head of household is doing very well. She may be in the middle or upper economic strata, for that matter. On the other hand, the unserved low-income and minority woman may be married with a large family and may be facing many of the social problems of alcoholism, drugs and crime in her milieu. This I can tell you, there are too many women unserved by the educational system.

Even when there are publicly sponsored programs they could use, endless barriers keep them from doing so. Very often such women do not really know the world outside of their immediate milieu. They don't trust school officials whom they are sure know nothing about their real needs. They can not see that making the effort to get to these programs will make any real change in their lives. It is easier for a Spanish-speaking woman, for instance, to stay in her Spanish-speaking community,

and let her children translate for her when English is needed. She can take a housecleaning job with very little English. Transportation to a program requires bus fare, and the pocketbook is empty. She may well need glasses and has not even got the energy to go through the bureaucratic steps of forcing welfare to provide them. Barriers are almost endless, but the biggest one of all is the hopelessness.

It is slowly dawning on educators that the answer to the problems of these women is very complicated. Forcing them to sit down to try to learn to read and write, as though everything else in their lives was just fine and literacy is all they need, just does not work. I, myself, have carried out various efforts with these women and you will not be surprised to hear that I have some very definite opinions about the way they should be helped. I am going to tell you about projects I have organized for working with these otherwise educationally unserved women. And I am happy to say that variations on this method are springing up in many places. Still not enough, of course. It is like filling a bucket with individual drops of water, and the bucket may even have a hole in it.

When I take students out to work in a low-income housing project, I spend a couple weeks trying to prepare them for the experience. Nevertheless, it is not until they have had the experience that they really know what the training was all about. Let me just mention five or six of the important principles we discuss, some of which are contrary to traditional educational principles. The graduate students are middle class, upwardly-

mobile persons who, although they may have experienced discrimination in that many of them are Black, they have not endured poverty, or the culture of poverty.

Precept number one is that the community women deserve and must be accorded the respect that the students wish for themselves, and it cannot be a phony respect. We go to the housing project to become friends with a group of women, to learn how they cope, what their interests are, how they love and care for their families in spite of every hardship. There is plenty to respect.

Secondly, we do not go with an agenda for the women, we carry no specific program or project. Whatever happens has to grow out of the relationships. These women have been made sadly dependent on society. They can receive welfare checks, but in return they must be accountable to a social worker, who in order to succeed in her job, has to be able to show how she had made these women improve. But you see, she cannot often succeed because the only way the women can succeed is to take responsibility for themselves and their surroundings and the social worker can't let them take the lead. They are wards of the city on whom they are dependent. So I and my students go there not to take any responsibility for them, but to follow their lead and help in ways they suggest as any good friends will do for one another.

In their state of hopelessness and cynicism, they are not going to suggest remedial education programs as any first step. Sitting down by themselves to work with books is the last thing they think will help. If they suggest activities or interests

that are really implausible, it is best for them to try to work them out and if they fail or change their minds, in doing so, they have learned something about reality, and in a safe situation. Thus failure is OK, if they have the support needed to go on and try something else. In this way they do test reality; they test their interests, strengths and abilities. That is all to the good. Eventually they will settle on something that is right for them and they feel really good about it because they know they did it themselves; it was their decision. They are becoming "masters of their own destiny" to use the phrase of Father M.M. Coady of the Antigonish Movement in Canada.

Thirdly, we are talking about small steps--success in small things. Witness a woman who, after meeting with the group for eight or ten weeks, volunteered to take the responsibility of collecting money from the group members, buying and serving refreshments to the group. This was a woman who until then had just sat around, looking down at the mouth, and generally pretty sad. No one asked for a volunteer to do this job, it was her idea. She took it on and did it responsibly and that was the beginning of many later good things for her. Eventually, she did take the high school equivalency studies and finally got a good job as a shop assistant in one of the best department stores in Washington, D.C. Who knows just how, but somehow, working with our student group over endless months, she came to the realization that everything in life was not hopeless and she herself could made the difference.

Fourthly, when we needed money to carry out various small projects, we worked with the women to raise it. We did not do it for them. The women decided what they needed money for and which projects they wanted to carry out. One of their concerns, for instance, was finding a way to help their sons get Boy Scout uniforms and to go on the Scout camping trips. The new self-esteem that a couple women learned when they realized that they were very good at organizing rummage sales, rubbed off on other women who became jealous to develop skills of their own. Sometimes they try and succeed, sometimes they only talk a good line and thus fail to accomplish because they just do not believe in themselves enough, or that trying will really make any difference.

For a case in point, take the woman I mentioned earlier who finally found herself, worked hard eventually to pass the high school equivalency examination and did land a job. One of her experiences which seems to have taught her a lot was working as a member of a three-woman team to do a small participatory research project in the community.

One graduate student, supported by a small grant from the University, devised a questionnaire to administer to 100 female single heads of households in an effort to determine their situation: problems, support systems, employment, age and education, number of children, their marital aspirations, and their education and career interests, if any. Instead of doing the actual interviewing herself, she used the project as a means of helping three community women develop leadership skills.

The women were charged to rewrite the questionnaire so that

the questions would be acceptable to the community women. Each woman was to find her own subjects, do the interviews, for each of which they received a small stipend; then working together, they had to compile their data. And finally each woman provided a short written evaluation of the findings and her experience, and had an hour-long interview with the students. It was beautiful to see what this experience did for the self-esteem of the women.

I told you above about the success that followed for one. Another woman, who had coped with every hard problem life has to offer, enjoyed her work so much, and did such an excellent job, that she found within herself the person she had known in her younger years. She volunteered time in the rental office, and then was taken on part-time and after a year, was given a very responsible full-time position. The third woman, who was sickly much of the time, could only inspire persons, like the students and other community workers, who came to her apartment to learn from her wisdom and frank discussion what students needed to know about working with educationally unserved low-income minority persons.

Ours was a very small program, but I am most pleased to say it continues. One of the UDC students got a group of the women together to form an incorporated group. They applied for and received grants to carry on the work of helping the women grow in an holistic manner. As with children's education, readiness is everything. The group provides a professional counselor, and the women counsel each other at whatever level help is needed:

budgeting, child care and parenting, personal grooming, acquiring eye glasses or dental work, information about education and job training opportunities, developing belief in themselves and much more. When they are ready they ask for literacy or other educational levels or very specific training for certain jobs. When they are ready and do ask themselves for educational opportunities, then their chances of success are pretty high.

One of the most important aspects of the development of the women, is that as they start to find themselves worthy individuals who have skill and leadership qualities, their children begin to see themselves differently. Women who take on educational programs often speak of the fun they have competing with their children to see who can get the best grades in school.

One very important underlying value in this type of endeavor is that it cannot be regarded as work or as a job. It has to be carried out in the light of friendship--human beings caring about other human beings. Progress is slow--often so very slow that it is hard to believe it exists. If this were a job, work that had to be accomplished, the worker would act like the social workers trying to force the women to grow in order to show the worker has succeeded, instead of nurturing the women in their growth so that they can succeed.

Nowadays, I am happy to say that I often hear of other programs somewhat similar to this one. I think it is a hopeful sign.

In closing, let me say that, as with all adult education, in the past we have seen great emphasis on the educational needs of the individual--for upward mobility in jobs and careers, for

increased self-esteem, for special learning interests, etc. Perhaps it was necessary for us to go through such a stage of individual needs fulfillment. However, if adult education is all about enhancing human life on this planet, then adult education must be about social concerns, as well. Many women have understood this well, and are serving causes of peace, environment, problems of the homeless, gun control, drunk driving and many others. Women, all women including minorities, have to know that new educational opportunities bring new responsibilities.

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